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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Human Rights Council panel discussion on the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl

Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 27/6, the Human Rights Council decided to convene, at its twenty-ninth session, a panel discussion on realizing the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl with a view to sharing lessons learned and best practices in that regard. Also in resolution 27/6, the Council requested the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to organize the panel and to liaise with States, relevant United Nations agencies, funds and programmes, relevant special procedures, civil society, including relevant children's and youth organizations, national human rights institutions and other relevant stakeholders with a view to ensuring their participation in and contribution to the panel discussion. Pursuant to that request, the panel discussion was held on 16 June 2015.

2. In its resolution 27/6, the Human Rights Council also requested the High Commissioner to prepare a summary report on the panel discussion and to present it to the Human Rights Council at its thirtieth session. The present report was prepared pursuant to that request.

3. The High Commissioner opened the panel discussion, which was moderated by the Associate Director of Programme Partnerships (Division of Programmes) at the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The panellists were Minister of State of the United Arab Emirates Reem Al Hashimy; the Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and Chairperson of its working group on girls' and women's right to education, Barbara Bailey; the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Kishore Singh; UNICEF Ethiopia Goodwill Ambassador Hannah Godefa; and the Regional Director for the West African Region of Plan International, Adama Coulibaly.

II. Summary of the discussion

A. Statement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

4. In his opening remarks, the High Commissioner stated that the empowerment of women had been one of the most significant achievements of the past century, and access to education one of the key elements in overturning the outdated view of women as confined to the domestic sphere. He stressed that education was a multiplier right that empowers women to make choices and to claim their human rights, including the right to participate fully in the taking of decisions that shape society. He welcomed the considerable progress that had been made in girls' education in recent years.

5. Nonetheless, almost one third of all countries had not achieved parity in primary education, and in less than half, there were as many girls as boys in lower-secondary grades. Despite the progress made, discrimination against girls persisted, including in the form of child marriage, early pregnancy and sexual violence, and harassment inside and outside schools. Together with social and cultural stereotypes that enforce obedience and fixed gender constructs, violence against girls and the targeting of schools by extremist movements continued to impair girls' access to education.

6. The High Commissioner also noted that, as a result of deeply entrenched discrimination, girls continued to be corralled into specific fields of study, which were often not those in high demand on the labour market. Young women, even when well-educated, consistently experienced higher unemployment rates than men, worked in more precarious jobs and were paid less for work of equal value. Enabling women and girls to obtain qualifications, but subsequently denying them the right to pursue their aspirations in full equality with men, did a disservice to young women and was a waste of many talents.

7. The High Commissioner emphasized that the culture of discrimination deeply entrenched in many societies should be challenged so as to allow women and girls to achieve their full potential and to deploy the skills that they have learned. He recalled the key role that education could play in dismantling persistent gender stereotypes that may have a profound impact on girls' health, self-confidence, vulnerability to violence and their enjoyment of every other human right. Pointing out that Girls' education was imperative in achieving the new agenda for development, the High Commissioner called upon States to take urgent measures to ensure that all girls had effective and safe access to education of quality, including human rights education.

B. Overview of presentations by the panellists

8. The panel moderator recalled that the right to education had been acknowledged as a multiplier right and stressed that, in spite of the remarkable progress made in increasing enrolment, gaps remained, particularly in the area of ensuring education for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds and in emergency situations.

9. Ms. Al Hashimy pointed out that States would be unable to meet current development goals and targets if they failed to empower women. She referred to some of the challenges that the United Arab Emirates had faced in achieving its Millennium Development Goal on education, including the low level of development and absence of governance and institutions. These challenges also presented opportunities for building an education system based on the principle of gender equality funded by the State's income deriving from natural resources. Robust legal frameworks had been adopted, including compulsory, free-of-charge primary education and the establishment of 18 years as the minimum age for marriage. The State's robust formal school system reflected the principle of gender equality: 90 per cent of girls and 87 per cent of boys were enrolled in primary education, while 95 per cent of girls and 80 per cent of boys who graduated from high school entered higher education. In addition, women in the United Arab Emirates constituted 70 per cent of college graduates, one of the highest proportions in the world. She emphasized that any State that prioritized education in its budget and built an educational system founded on the principles of gender equality and the rights of the child would obtain positive results.

10. Ms. Bailey outlined various ways in which structural and ideological factors hindered access to education for girls. She referred in particular to entrenched sociocultural norms and stereotypes, which dictated gender relations in the family, including the allocation of resources within the family and determing what a given generation considered appropriate gender roles. This often resulted in gender inequalities, including in the area of access to schooling and participation in the formal work force, with women being disadvantaged. She referred to the incidence of early and forced marriages and adolescent pregnancy, and the marked preference for boys as examples that exacerbated the continued subordination of females in the private and public domains. To address this challenge, women had to have the right to exercise personal autonomy and greater control over their sexual and reproductive health and rights. In addition, in order for women to become economically independent and less reliant on male patronage, they had to be able to move out of the private sphere into paid decent work in the formal labour market. Women had to be able to participate more fully in political processes and decision-making at all levels.

11. Mr. Singh welcomed the recognition of the right to education as a multiplier right, and stressed that making it a true right required entitlement and empowerment. He described inclusive, non-discriminatory education as a core element of the right to education. He also stressed the need for quality, human rights-based education in all areas – knowledge, values, competence and skills – as well as the importance of focusing on the

contents of education. He recalled that States had an obligation to translate their international obligations into national policies, and emphasized the need for an adequate legal framework as the foundation for the equal right to education. In the area of education, this obligation included temporary special measures and ensuring gender parity and access to education by marginalized communities, including rural communities. Mr. Singh further explained the need for developing strategies that linked literacy programmes and skills development, and expressed concern about the mushrooming of privatization of education, which disadvantaged women.

12. Ms. Godefa focused her intervention on the role of young people, including girls, in the development of education policies. She stated that Governments could ensure that all girls had access to education by making it a State priority and by working with youth groups to give them a voice in education policies. The barriers to girls' access to education could be both direct and indirect, including, for example, trafficking. To ensure that girls were able to enjoy the right to education on an equal footing with boys, she recommended that States provide stipends and scholarships, and free or subsidized child care for girls with children, as well as income transfer programmes for poor families, so that girls were not removed from schools for economic reasons. She also recommended that schools be constructed locally and closer to communities as a means to increase enrolment and to lower the indirect costs of sending girls to school. She also stressed the importance of awareness-raising by youth groups and States in the domestic and global spheres.

13. Mr. Coulibaly recounted the story of his sister to highlight the multiple barriers to girls' education, which included the cost of education, the distance to schools, violence in and around schools, harmful gender norms, child marriage and early pregnancy. Such barriers became insurmountable during emergencies and in conflict situations, and were particularly acute for marginalized and excluded populations, particularly girls with disabilities and those belonging to minority groups. He pointed out that emergencies often led to disruptions in education after which many children never returned to school, while those who stayed received poor quality education as a result of an unsafe and inadequate learning environment. For girls, even a short interruption caused by an emergency situation could lead not only to missing out on education but also expose them to the risk of child marriage, trafficking and other forms of gender-based violence. Emergencies could nonetheless offer the opportunity to rebuild more a resilient community or to change norms and behaviours that hindered girls' education.

C. Interventions by representatives of States Members of the Human Rights Council, observer States and other observers

14. In their interventions, States emphasized the importance that they placed on guaranteeing girls' equal access to education and described specific programmes and policies to overcome obstacles and challenges in this regard. A number of representatives referred to good practices at the national level, including enshrining the right to education in the Constitution and enacting specific laws to guarantee free primary and secondary education. States also referred to measures taken to reduce the distance between schools and homes, investments in infrastructure and special measures such as scholarships, school uniforms and the removal of other education-related costs for children from marginalized communities. A number of States pointed out that women often achieved less in their careers and in the labour market owing to deeply rooted stereotypes in public consciousness, while several expressed their concern about gender stereotypes, including in fields of study reserved for girls.

15. Several speakers expressed their concern that gender parity had not been achieved in education owing to, inter alia, gender and ideological stereotypes, violence and

discrimination against girls both in and around schools, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child, early and forced child marriage, the militarization of school premises in situations of conflict, attacks against schools, and threats to the security and safety of female students. A number of speakers referred to the Safe Schools Declaration, which focuses on education for children in conflict situations, signed to date by 47 States.

16. Several speakers highlighted the importance of a continued focus on education in the post-2015 development framework as a means to ensure gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Speakers referred to the need for good practices in the areas of comprehensive sexuality education, education for girls in conflict settings, addressing gender-based violence in and around schools, and the contents of education and its role in gender stereotypes. Participants urged the Human Rights Council to prioritize school-related gender-based violence in its agenda. Several States referred to the importance of international cooperation to make schools safer, to empower women and to obtain the necessary budgetary resources.

III. Concluding remarks by the panellists

17. **The panellists highlighted the importance of adopting and enforcing legislation and other polices on education in accordance with international human rights standards and on the basis of the principle of the best interests of the child.**

18. **It was agreed that the provision of such basic services as separate sanitation facilities and hygiene kits had enormous benefits in the enrolment and retention of girls in schools. In addition, including comprehensive sexuality education in school curricula was highlighted as a key action to help girls to avoid early pregnancy and in order to address harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage.**

19. **The panellists recommended that quality primary education should be compulsory and free, and highlighted the importance of the transition to secondary education. They referred to the importance of measures to prevent child and forced marriages, including of setting the minimum legal age for marriage at 18. Appropriate institutional frameworks that prioritized education in budgetary allocations, supported early childhood education, provided a safe and supportive environment in schools and integrated a gender perspective into education policies were also highlighted as necessary. They also stressed that education should be non-discriminatory, inclusive and culturally sensitive, and that education policies should incorporate the voices of children and young people, including marginalized and disadvantaged girls, such as girls with disabilities, and rural and poor girls, and harness the power of social media as a means of changing education policies and encouraging girls to stay in school.**

20. **The panellists also noted that education outcomes for girls were closely linked to the division of labour between the sexes, gender stereotypes and gender-based discrimination, violence and abuse, and that many women and girls were therefore unable to enjoy the multiplier effect of education. Most current education systems, it was noted, failed to live up to their potential as catalysts for equality between men and women, but rather strengthened the existing gender order and helped to maintain hierarchies within schools and in the wider community. It was therefore important to review the content of education so as to remove all discriminatory elements.**

21. **In Ethiopia, girl clubs, in which girls at the local level were involved in mitigating school- and community-based barriers to education by liaising with school management and parents to advocate for changes such as separate sanitation facilities,**

were cited a good practice. In the area of social media, in South Africa, the UNICEF Techno Girl programme, which connects more than 10,000 adolescent girls in underprivileged schools with mentors from the technological sector in order to boost their skills and job readiness, was also cited as a good practice. States were invited to heed the concluding recommendations made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and to note the Committee's upcoming general recommendation on addressing obligations in all dimensions of the right to education.

22. With regard to disasters and emergency settings, the panellists concurred that even the worst situations could offer opportunities to strengthen communities and make them more resilient and more inclusive and equal. In addition, good education in emergencies could bring both short-term protective and long-term transformative change. For example, the Plan International programmes for internally displaced persons and refugees in Mali and South Sudan had allowed many girls to attend formal and non-formal education, often for the first time. As a result, not only did more girls have access to education but were also better prepared to participate in decision-making, which had in turn led to a gradual change in community attitudes. The panellists encouraged States to take preventive measures to minimize disruptions to education during disasters, to have education sector plans based on gender-sensitive and participatory approaches in all phases of emergency responses, and to establish a funding mechanism for education in emergencies. They also recommended that States pay greater attention to the human rights of children in emergencies, including girls' right to education, and include related issues in their engagement with the United Nations human rights system, including the treaty bodies, the universal periodic review and the special procedures.

23. The panellists also emphasized underlined that, in order to implement fully the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl, States had to remove structural barriers to education, such as gender bias and stereotypes from curricula and teaching and learning materials, and ensure girls' safety in schools, including through the provision of adequate sanitary facilities and safe drinking water, as well as protection from sexual harassment, abuse and violence in the school environment. They should in addition ensure the justiciability of the right to education. The panellists encouraged States collectively to make the vision of every girl enjoying full access to education a reality.